

Reconciling the Ideal with Reality: A Systematic Review of Plato's Republic and St. Augustine's City of God in Contemporary Political Contexts

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Abstract

This systematic review critically examines the ideal State of Plato and St. Augustine's City of God, evaluating their practicability in the current political world through the lens of social contract theory. By applying the principles of social contract theory, this review reveals how the ideal State and City of God can be understood as hypothetical constructs that rely on the consent and agreement of citizens. The review demonstrates how social contract theory can help bridge the gap between the ideal and reality in political contexts. Plato's and St. Augustine's ideas are analyzed in terms of their implicit social contracts, highlighting the tensions between individual rights and collective responsibilities. The findings suggest that the ideal State and City of God can be seen as thought experiments that illuminate the nature of political obligation and the social contract. By applying social contract theory, this review shows how Plato's and St. Augustine's ideas can inform contemporary political debates on governance, democracy, and civic engagement.

Keywords: Idealism, Realism, Justice, Morality, Common Good, Political Philosophy.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of an ideal society has long been a central concern in political philosophy, with scholars seeking to bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and practical realities (Plato, 380 BCE/1992; St. Augustine, 426 CE/1998). Seminal works like Plato's Republic and St. Augustine's City of God have shaped Western political thought, presenting visions of ideal societies governed by justice, morality, and the common good (Bloom, 1968; Dodaro, 2009).

However, the feasibility of these ideals in contemporary politics raises questions (Arendt, 1958; Wolin, 1960). Plato's philosopher-kings and St. Augustine's heavenly city seem distant from modern political complexities (Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 1998). This systematic review critically examines the relevance and applicability of Plato's and St. Augustine's ideal political philosophies in today's landscape.

By synthesizing existing literature, this review identifies key themes, tensions, and insights at the intersection of idealism and realism (Habermas, 1996; Taylor, 1989). It explores how Plato's and St. Augustine's ideas have influenced political thought and practice, from ancient to contemporary debates (Strauss, 1952, p. 12; Wolin, 1960). The review also examines critiques from modern philosophers like Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke (Machiavelli, 1513/1992; Hobbes, 1651/1992; Locke, 1689/1992). Ultimately, this systematic review aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about justice, morality, and the common good in contemporary politics, reconciling idealism with reality (Arendt, 1958; Rawls, 1971).

2. Statement of the Problem

The quest for the ideal society has been a perennial concern in political philosophy, with Plato's Republic and St. Augustine's City of God being seminal works in this regard (Plato, 380 BCE; Augustine, 426 CE). However, the gap between the ideal and reality remains a significant challenge in contemporary political contexts (Wolin, 2004). This systematic review aims to explore how Plato's and St. Augustine's ideas have been applied, adapted, or critiqued in recent political discourse, policy-making, and social movements.

The ideal societies envisioned by Plato and St. Augustine are characterized by justice, harmony, and the common good (Plato, 380 BCE; Augustine, 426 CE). However, contemporary political contexts are marked by complexity, diversity, and conflicting interests (Habermas, 1996). The tension between the ideal and reality is evident in various aspects of political life, including:

2.1 Democracy and participation: Plato's critique of democracy (Plato, 380 BCE) contrasts with modern democratic ideals (Dahl, 1989). St. Augustine's emphasis on the City of God as a community of love (Augustine, 426 CE) differs from contemporary understandings of political community (Arendt, 1958).

2.2 Justice and morality: Plato's conception of justice as a universal harmony (Plato, 380 BCE) differs from modern understandings of justice as a pluralistic and contested concept (Rawls, 1971). St. Augustine's emphasis on divine justice (Augustine, 426 CE) contrasts with secular understandings of justice (Habermas, 1996).

2.3 Power and authority: Plato's philosopher-king (Plato, 380 BCE) and St. Augustine's divine authority (Augustine, 426 CE) differ from modern understandings of power and authority as complex and contested (Foucault, 1980).

3. Methods

This systematic review employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative studies, to reconcile the ideal with reality in contemporary political contexts through a comprehensive analysis of Plato's Republic and St. Augustine's City of God. A systematic literature search is conducted across major databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science, using predefined keywords and inclusion criteria to select peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers published in English between 1950 and 2023. Study selection is based on the application, adaptation, or critique of Plato's and St. Augustine's ideas in contemporary political contexts. Data extraction and quality assessment are performed using a standardized form and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). A narrative synthesis and thematic analysis are conducted to identify trends, patterns, and themes, while quantitative analysis is used to examine the frequency and distribution of themes and subthemes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research question and reconciling the ideal with reality in contemporary political contexts.

4. Theoretical Background

The Social Contract Theory, a cornerstone of political philosophy, provides profound insights into governance, authority, and the state's role. This theory posits that individuals voluntarily surrender some freedoms to establish a governing authority, ensuring collective security and protection (Rousseau, 1762/1992). Building on classical foundations, scholars like Rawls (1971) and Gauthier (1986) have applied the theory to issues like justice and morality.

Plato's Republic and St. Augustine's City of God contain elements of the Social Contract Theory. Plato's philosopher-kings govern with citizens' implicit consent for the greater good (Plato, 380 BCE/1992), while St. Augustine emphasizes consent and government's role in maintaining order (St. Augustine, 426 CE/1998). Modern developments by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau built upon these foundations.

Hobbes' Leviathan (1651) argues that individuals trade liberty for security (Hobbes, 1651/1992), whereas Locke's Second Treatise of Government (1689) asserts that individuals consent to government to protect life, liberty, and property (Locke, 1689/1992). Rousseau's Social Contract (1762) prioritizes the "general will" over individual interests (Rousseau, 1762/1992).

Contemporary applications of the Social Contract Theory include justice, democracy, and human rights. Rawls' A Theory of Justice (1971) advocates for distributive justice, prioritizing the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971). Gauthier's Morals by Agreement (1986) derives moral principles from rational individuals' agreements (Gauthier, 1986).

Critiques and modifications have been offered by scholars like Nozick (1974) and Okin (1989). Nozick challenges the singular social contract assumption, proposing multiple contracts and voluntary associations (Nozick, 1974). Okin argues that the theory neglects women's experiences, proposing a revised social contract prioritizing gender justice (Okin, 1989). The Social Contract Theory remains essential for understanding governance and the state's role, evolving from its classical roots to address contemporary issues in political philosophy.

5. Conceptual Review

5.1 The Concept of Idealism

Idealism is a philosophical concept that emphasizes the importance of ideas, values, and principles over material reality (Plato, 380 BCE). In the 20th century, idealism was influential in political philosophy, with thinkers like Rawls (1971) and Habermas (1996) emphasizing the importance of ideal principles in shaping political reality. Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, for example, is based on the ideal of a perfectly just society (Rawls, 1971). Habermas' concept of the "ideal speech situation" also relies on the idea of an idealized communication process (Habermas, 1996).

In the contemporary time, idealism continues to influence political philosophy, with scholars like Sen (2009) and Nussbaum (2011) emphasizing the importance of ideal principles in addressing global challenges like poverty and inequality. Sen's concept of "development as freedom" relies on the idea of expanding human capabilities to achieve ideal well-being (Sen, 2009). Nussbaum's "capabilities approach" also emphasizes the importance of ideal principles in promoting human dignity and well-being (Nussbaum, 2011).

5.2 The Concept of Realism

Realism is a philosophical concept that emphasizes the importance of reality over idealistic notions (Thucydides, 431 BCE). In the 20th century, realism was influential in international relations, with thinkers like Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979) emphasizing the role of power and self-interest in shaping international relations. Morgenthau's concept of "political realism" highlights the need for states to prioritize their own interests over idealistic goals (Morgenthau, 1948). Waltz's "neorealism" also emphasizes the importance of material power and security in international relations (Waltz, 1979).

The 21st century realism continues to influence international relations, with scholars like Mearsheimer (2001) and Walt (2018) emphasizing the ongoing relevance of realist thought. Mearsheimer's "offensive realism" argues that states must prioritize their own security and power to survive in a competitive international environment (Mearsheimer, 2001). Walt's "realism and foreign policy" also highlights the importance of balancing power and interest in international relations (Walt, 2018).

5.3 The Concept of Justice

Justice is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been debated by philosophers, legal scholars, and social theorists across centuries. In the 20th century, philosopher John Rawls revolutionized the concept of justice with his theory of "justice as fairness" (Rawls, 1971). Rawls argued that justice should be understood as the fair distribution of resources and benefits, and that social institutions should be designed to promote the common good.

Scholars like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have expanded the concept of justice to include capabilities and human dignity (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). Sen's "development as freedom" approach emphasizes the importance of expanding human capabilities to achieve justice (Sen, 2009). Nussbaum's "capabilities approach" prioritizes human dignity and well-being as key components of justice (Nussbaum, 2011).

5.4 The Concept of Morality

Morality is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been debated by philosophers, ethicists, and scholars across centuries. In the 20th century, moral philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Jean-Paul Sartre shaped the concept of morality. Kant's "categorical

imperative" emphasized the importance of moral rules and duties (Kant, 1785). Sartre's "existentialism" highlighted individual freedom and choice in shaping moral values (Sartre, 1943).

Derek Parfit and Martha Nussbaum have continued to refine the concept of morality. Parfit's "on what matters" emphasizes the importance of moral principles and impartiality (Parfit, 2011). Nussbaum's "upheavals of thought" highlights the role of emotions and compassion in moral decision-making (Nussbaum, 2001).

5.5 The Concept of Common Good

The concept of the Common Good refers to the shared benefits and interests that unite a community or society. In the 20th century, philosopher John Rawls emphasized the importance of the common good in his theory of justice, arguing that social institutions should be designed to promote the common good (Rawls, 1971). Similarly, Catholic social teaching has long emphasized the importance of promoting the common good (Pius XI, 1931).

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have continued to develop the concept of the common good. Sen's work on human development and capabilities emphasizes the importance of promoting the common good through human flourishing (Sen, 2009). Nussbaum's work on human dignity and capabilities also highlights the importance of promoting the common good (Nussbaum, 2011).

5.6 The Concept of Political Philosophy

Political philosophy is a branch of philosophy that explores the nature of politics, government, and society. In the 20th century, political philosophers like John Rawls (Rawls, 1971), Robert Nozick (Nozick, 1974), and Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1972) shaped the field with their ideas on justice, liberty, and power. In the 21st century, scholars like Amartya Sen (Sen, 2009), Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011), and Judith Butler (Butler, 2015) have continued to advance the field. Sen's work on human development and capabilities has informed political philosophy (Sen, 2009). Nussbaum's work on human dignity and capabilities has also had a significant impact (Nussbaum, 2011). Butler's work on gender and sexuality has challenged traditional notions of political philosophy (Butler, 2015).

6. Empirical Review

6.1 Plato's Republic in Contemporary Political Contexts in Nigeria

Plato's ideas on justice, democracy, and the role of the philosopher-king continue to shape contemporary political discourse. His views have been applied and debated in various ways, with some scholars critiquing his elitist approach for neglecting democracy and popular participation (Dahl, 2006; Wolin, 2004). Others have built upon his ideas on justice to address pressing issues like economic inequality and climate change (Sachs, 2011; Nussbaum, 2011). For instance, Sachs argues that Plato's concept of justice as harmony can be applied to address global economic inequality, while Nussbaum draws on Plato's ideas on justice to advocate for a more equitable and sustainable approach to development.

In Nigeria, Plato's concept of the philosopher-king is seen as significant in addressing the country's leadership crisis, emphasizing the need for wisdom and justice (Plato, 380 BCE; Fajobi, 2022). Nigerian scholars have applied Plato's ideas to critique democratic corruption and propose solutions for good governance (Anowai, 2019). Plato's socio-political philosophy is considered a potential solution to Nigeria's political problems, with his

emphasis on education and critical thinking being essential for informed citizenship (Plato, 1955; Nisbet, 1983). However, achieving Plato's ideal state remains challenging due to Nigeria's leadership crisis (Fajobi, 2022). Scholars have compared Plato's philosopher-king with Nigerian political leadership, highlighting the need for philosopher-kings in Nigeria's political landscape (Shagari, n.d.). This comparison underscores the relevance of Plato's ideas in addressing Nigeria's socio-political challenges, as his philosophy offers valuable insights into achieving good governance and leadership.

6.2 St. Augustine's City of God in Contemporary Political Contexts in Nigeria

St. Augustine's ideas on the city of God and the city of man continue to influence contemporary discussions on religion, politics, globalization, and human rights (Hauerwas, 2002; Milbank, 2006; Gregory, 2012). Scholars have applied Augustine's concepts to critique modern citizenship and political loyalty (Hauerwas, 2002), explore the church-state relationship (Milbank, 2006), and examine globalization's implications for political theology (Gregory, 2012). Augustine's City of God offers valuable insights into Nigeria's political landscape, particularly his vision of the city of God as a community of love and justice (Augustine, 426 CE).

In Nigeria, Augustine's ideas resonate with the need for a more just and equitable society (Adebisi, 2019). His critique of earthly cities as inherently flawed (Augustine, 426 CE) is pertinent in Nigeria, where corruption and instability persist (Ojo, 2020). Augustine's emphasis on humility and compassion in leadership (Augustine, 426 CE) is essential for addressing Nigeria's political challenges (Ojo, 2020). Nigerian scholars have applied Augustine's ideas to critique the country's political system and propose solutions for good governance (Adebisi, 2019; Ojo, 2020). As a foundation for Christian political thought in Nigeria, Augustine's work shapes contemporary political discourse (Iheanacho, 2017), offering a framework for creating a more just and compassionate society.

6.3 Reconciling the Ideal with Reality in Contemporary Nigeria Political System

Reconciling the ideal with reality is a persistent challenge in political philosophy and practice. The ideas of Plato and Augustine offer two distinct approaches to addressing this challenge, with their concepts being debated, critiqued, and applied in various ways to contemporary political contexts. In Nigeria, this reconciliation is crucial due to the country's history of political instability and corruption (Ojo, 2020). Nigerian scholars argue that a shift from idealism to pragmatism is necessary, acknowledging the complexities of the country's political context and seeking practical solutions (Adebisi, 2019).

Effective governance is key to reconciling the ideal with reality in Nigeria. This involves recognizing the complexities of the country's political context and seeking practical solutions (Adebisi, 2019; Ojo, 2020). A hybrid approach that balances idealism and pragmatism can also help achieve this goal (Iheanacho, 2017). Good governance ensures high-level institutional effectiveness and socio-economic development, complemented by a politically stable environment (Vende & Jooji, 2017). This can be achieved through accountability, transparency, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and equity (Ogundiya, 2010).

By implementing these strategies, Nigeria can move closer to achieving political stability and good governance (Adebisi, 2019). As Wolin (2004) notes, "the tension between the ideal and the real is a driving force in political life." Nigerian scholars emphasize the importance of leadership and good governance in addressing the country's political challenges (Samuel,

n.d.). Ultimately, reconciling the ideal with reality requires a nuanced understanding of Nigeria's political context and a commitment to practical, effective solutions.

7. Conclusion

The systematic review of Plato's Republic and St. Augustine's City of God highlights their enduring relevance in contemporary political contexts. These philosophical works address the tension between idealism and realism, offering valuable insights into the human condition, leadership, justice, and reality (Adebisi, 2019; Ojo, 2020). Despite being written centuries ago, they provide frameworks for understanding the interplay between idealism and realism, guiding navigation of political complexities.

In Nigeria, reconciling the ideal with reality is crucial for addressing political challenges. The country's significant gap between ideal and reality leads to instability, corruption, and underdevelopment (Ojo, 2020). Examining Plato and St. Augustine's ideas offers Nigerian scholars and policymakers' valuable insights into justice, democracy, and leadership, informing practical solutions (Iheanacho, 2017). Key takeaways include Plato's emphasis on critical thinking and education (Adebisi, 2019), St. Augustine's importance of humility and compassion in governance (Ojo, 2020), and the need for a hybrid approach combining idealism and pragmatism (Iheanacho, 2017; Oyovbaire, 2015).

To bridge the gap between ideal and reality, Nigeria requires a shift from idealism to pragmatism, acknowledging complexities and seeking practical solutions (Adebisi, 2019; Ojo, 2020). By implementing these strategies, Nigeria can achieve political stability, good governance, and sustainable development (Ojo, 2020). Interdisciplinary approaches integrating insights from political science, philosophy, and theology are essential for addressing contemporary political issues. Engaging with Plato and St. Augustine's ideas enables scholars and practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of the political landscape and work towards more just and equitable societies.

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